NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
NEWS ANALYSIS NO. 1-0293 MARCH 4, 1976
CHARLES MEDD

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE MOOD OF THE COUNTRY

ANNCR:

NOW THAT THE SECOND MAJOR PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY IS OVER, THE POLITICAL EXPERTS ARE BUSY TELLING THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WHAT THE RESULTS MEAN. BUT SO FAR THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT THE PEOPLE ARE PAYING VERY MUCH ATTENTION, AND CHARLES MEDD HAS SOME OBSERVATIONS.

VOICE:

A FEW DAYS BEFORE THE NEW HAMPSHIRE PRIMARY ELECTION, A NEW YORK TIMES CORRESPONDENT POSED A TROUBLING QUESTION: HAD THOUSANDS OF NEWSMEN GATHERED IN THAT TINY, SNOW-BOUND STATE, HE ASKED, BECAUSE THE EVENT WAS SO IMPORTANT, OR HAD THE EVENT ASSUMED AN IMPORTANCE BECAUSE SO MANY NEWSMEN WERE THERE TO COVER IT? ON ELECTION DAY, THE VOTERS OF NEW HAMPSHIRE PROVIDED AN ANSWER OF SORTS WHEN ONLY ONE-THIRD OF THEM BOTHERED TO CAST BALLOTS. AND ONE WEEK LATER, AS IF TO PROVE THE POINT, AN EVEN SMALLER PERCENTAGE OF THE MASSACHUSETTS ELECTORATE WENT TO THE POLLS, DESPITE EXTRAORDINARY MEDIA COVERAGE AND A PLETHORA OF CANDIDATES PROMISING SOLUTIONS TO A HOST OF CRITICAL ISSUES.

IN AN ELECTION YEAR THAT IS HARDLY LACKING IN DRAMA -- AFTER ALL, THE PRESIDENT FACES A CHALLENGE FOR HIS OWN PARTY'S NOMINATION AND THE DEMOCRATS HAVE ANOTHER HORSERACE ON THEIR HANDS -- HOW DO WE ACCOUNT FOR THIS SEEMING VOTER INDIFFERENCE? THE STANDARD EXPLANATION -- BASED ON PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS -- IS THAT POLITICIANS AND POLITICS HAVE FALLEN INTO LOW REPUTE, THAT AFTER THE HORRORS OF VIETNAM AND WATERGATE THE AMERICAN PEOPLE HAVE LOST THEIR FAITH

IN GOVERNMENT. THAT BEING SO, WE ARE TOLD MORE AMERICANS HAVE CONCLUDED THAT IT MAKES LITTLE OR NO DIFFERENCE WHO WINS THE ELECTION, SO, THEY ASK, WHY VOTE?

THIS INTERPRETATION, HOWEVER WIDE ITS ACCEPTANCE, OVERLOOKS SOME HISTORICAL FACTS. TODAY'S POLITICIANS MAY NOT BE POPULAR FOLK HEROES, BUT THEN THEY NEVER WERE. MARK TWAIN MADE AMERICANS LAUGH WHEN HE SAID THEY HAD THE BEST CONGRESS MONEY COULD BUY, AND THAT WAS ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO. THEN AS NOW, SKEPTICISM ABOUT POLITICS WAS NOT ONLY INEVITABLE BUT PERHAPS HEALTHY AS WELL.

STILL ANOTHER LOOK AT THE HISTORY BOOKS SHOWS THAT AMERICANS SELDOM TAKE MUCH INTEREST IN PRIMARY ELECTIONS UNLESS THEY ARE ANGRY OR AFRAID. THE COUNTRY TODAY HAS ITS SHARE OF PROBLEMS, BUT FOR A CLEAR MAJORITY OF US THERE IS NO SENSE OF IMPENDING DOOM.

A GROUP OF SCHOLAR-WRITERS, GATHERED IN WASHINGTON THIS WEEK TO DISCUSS VOTER APATHY, OFFERED ANOTHER EXPLANATION. THEY AGREED THAT THE AVERAGE AMERICAN IS NOT AS NAIVE AS HE WAS IN EARLIER TIMES, THAT HE NO LONGER BELIEVES HIS GOVERNMENT CAN OR SHOULD TRY TO SOLVE EVERY HUMAN PROBLEM. THIS POINT OF VIEW, THEY SAID, IS EVIDENCE OF A NEW NATIONAL MATURITY, A SIGN THAT AMERICA AFTER TWO HUNDRED YEARS IS FINALLY REACHING WHAT ONE OF THEM CALLED "MIDDLE AGE." SUCH A CONCLUSION MAY NOT BE SATISFYING TO THE POLITICIANS OR TO THE NEWSMEN COVERING THE GREAT STORY OF 1976, BUT IT MAY EXPLAIN WHY THE VOTERS ARE NOT QUITE AS EXCITED AS SOME THINK THEY SHOULD BE.

-0-

GH/LP